IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

'Demo Program' great as teaching, sales aid

Dan Bricklin's "Demo Program" does more than you'd expect. It simulates the running of other programs, so you can rerun sequences for training purposes.

It even simulates programs that don't exist yet!

In fact, it's so neat that I predict you'll begin dreaming up your own uses for it while you're reading this article.

For example, when I first discovered the program, I immediately thought of the following two applications for it, and it turned out that the Demo Program handled both beautifully:

First, let's suppose you'd like to train several people in your office to use a particular program, step by step, and you'd like to do it on the computer screen in such a way that they could "self-teach" themselves if they ever forgot the details. The Demo Program allows you to capture screen images from the program and create a "slide show" on your computer screen showing each one. Then, you can amend each slide, adding different colored notes explaining each one.
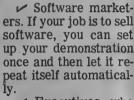
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Second, suppose you have an ideal program that you want set up. Instead of supplying a programmer with flow charts and lengthy descriptions of what you'd like the program to do, you can "prototype" the operation with slides to show the programmer precisely what the program should look like when it is running.

Who might benefit most from The Demo Program? Primarily, these five groups:

✔ Corporate trainers. If your job is to train people, day in and day out, this program is perfect because you can set up standard training sessions that automatically repeat themselves.

✔ Software developers. If you want to show how the finished product will look — or fool everyone to think that the work is already done — you can show your customers exactly how a new program is intended to operate so there won't be any misunderstandings.

✔ Computer managers. If you want to give clear instructions to programmers or software developers, you can do so without being misunderstood.

✔ Software marketers. If your job is to sell software, you can set up your demonstration once and then let it repeat itself automatically.

✔ Executives who give presentations. You can capture data from your computer screen for presentation.

However, as with any PC program, The Demo Program has a few drawbacks. The documentation is terrible and the program is difficult to learn. In fact, unless you're willing to invest several frustrating hours to become proficient, think twice before buying.

One solution is to allow someone in your office who is technically oriented and enjoys a challenge to set it up and teach you how to use it. This is relatively painless and takes only about 30 minutes of executive time.

Or, even better, let this person go all the way and set up the training sessions or new-program simulations for you. This way, you get all the benefits without the frustration and at relatively little cost.

The Demo Program runs on IBM PCs and PC-compatible computers, and is published by Software Garden Inc. of West Newton, Mass. It sells for $74.95.

Dan Bricklin, the author, was one of the original developers of VisiCalc, the spread-sheet program that started the personal computer revolution in the mid-1970s.

To sum up, the Demo Program could be very useful in most business situations. But it is hard to learn and has a very difficult manual. If you have someone in your office who is technically oriented and who would enjoy setting it up for you, I recommend it highly.

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